

Gherghina, S. , Soare, S. and Jacquet, V. (2020) Deliberative democracy and political parties: functions and consequences. *European Political Science*, 19, pp. 200-211. (doi: [10.1057/s41304-019-00234-0](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-019-00234-0))

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Deposited on 02 March 2020

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Deliberative Democracy and Political Parties: Functions and Consequences

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Abstract

Research on intra-party deliberation focuses extensively on its normative aspects and its potential benefits for democratic quality. Little is known about how deliberation functions in practice and the consequences it has. This symposium aims to fill this gap in the literature by bringing together four examples of political parties that use deliberative practices: the Czech Pirate Party, the Danish Alternativet, the Romanian Demos, and the Spanish Workers' Socialist Party. The symposium maps the use of deliberation and identifies effects such as high quality of internal decision-making process, legitimacy of those running for public office, and electoral performance.

Keywords: deliberation, political parties, consequences, legitimacy, elections

Introduction

Traditional deliberative democratic theory has treated political parties as the least likely environment for good deliberation (Cohen, 1989). Over the last three decades, this has changed to some extent, at least in the newly formed parties that do not rely on the traditional forms of organization. The development of deliberative practices has challenged the function and the internal organization of political parties. In the context of disaffection toward political elites and institutions, scholars focused on the growing societal complexity of post-industrial economies and the change in citizens' values and demands (Norris, 1999, Foa and Mounk, 2016). Citizens reject traditional form of participation, characterized by hierarchical and top-down approaches, and are more ready to confront elites with demands from below (Dalton and Welzel, 2014, Inglehart and Norris, 2017). The political sophistication of post-materialist cohorts puts strong pressure on parties and representative institutions for more inclusive and transparent decision-making (Kreiss, 2014, Faucher, 2015, Della Porta et

al., 2017, Bennett et al., 2018). The opening-up of economic, cultural and political national borders (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019) and the wide diffusion of digital technologies has further altered the role of parties as traditional arenas of information and socialization (Dubnick, 2003, Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, Dahlgren, 2013).

In this context, political parties became unfit for the challenges of post-materialist societies (Mair, 2013, Ignazi, 2018). Since 1990, many parties have altered their internal structure and functioning (Ignazi, 2018), and opened up their organization and policy-agenda to greater individual involvement. Two main avenues have been pursued: 1) providing members and sympathizers with opportunities to select candidates or leaders (Hazan and Rahat, 2010, Pilet and Cross, 2014) and 2) providing members with the opportunity to influence important party decision (e.g. membership ballots) (Scarrow, 2014). The success of these strategies remains questionable since they often led to greater control for party elites (Gherghina, 2013, Pilet and Cross, 2014, Aylott and Bolin, 2016). More recently, deliberative practices have been presented as a way to reinvigorate the nature of intra-party democracy (Teorell, 1999, Wolkenstein 2016). They have been developed to foster deliberation among party members and supporters about particular policies and candidate selections. These deliberations can take place in face-to-face meetings or via online platforms. Earlier studies show that deliberation is normatively appealing and practically possible in political parties (Bolleyer et al., 2015, Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein, 2017, Bennett et al., 2018, Otjes, 2019).

However, we lack a clear understanding of the functioning (who participates and how participants interact) and the effects of these partisan deliberative practices. This symposium contributes to filling this gap by analyzing the experiences of four political parties that implemented innovative deliberative practices: the Czech Pirate Party, the Danish Alternativet, the Romanian Demos, and the Spanish Workers' Socialist Party. The symposium aims to map the preconditions for the adoption of specific deliberative practices within parties and to explain their effects. On this point, the four contributions highlight a variety of effects, ranging from enhanced quality of internal decision-making process (Alternativet and the Czech Pirate Party) or higher legitimacy of those running for public office (Demos) to electoral performance (Spanish Workers' Socialist Party and the Czech Pirate Party). To increase the homogeneity of the symposium and to make the empirical dialogue straightforward, each of the four substantive contributions is structured along the same four

sections: (1) a description of the party including an explanation of why it has been chosen for analysis (2) general features of the deliberation in this party (who initiated it and why, who were the participants, what were the procedures of deliberation), (3) effects of the deliberation (intended and unintended) and 4) what we learn from these effects and the relevance for the broader fields of study.

This introductory text provides a general framework of analysis by summarizing the state of the art and setting the ground for analysis. We next discuss theoretical and empirical considerations regarding intra-party deliberation. The third section summarizes and discusses the insights provided by the four case studies regarding intra-party deliberation.

Deliberative practice in political parties

The notion of deliberation lies at the core of the evolution of democratic theory at the end of the 20th century (Habermas, 1996, Dryzek, 2000), supplanting participation as the most commonly invoked milestone of democratic aspiration (Floridia, 2017). Founded on “argumentative exchanges, reciprocal reason giving, and on public debates which precede decisions” (Floridia 2014, 305), deliberation marks a shift from a vote-centric conception of democracy to a talk-centric conception (Chambers, 2003). Accordingly, the focal point of democratic decision-making is no longer the aggregation of fixed preferences, but the exchanges of justification that precede this decision (Manin, 1987). Within the consensus in favor of the general idea, various theorists have proposed their own conceptualization of deliberative democracy. Two main types of deliberation can be identified (Bächtiger et al., 2010). On the one side, the traditional Habermasian perspective focuses on the exchange of rational arguments and the search for the common good. The ultimate goal of this type of deliberation is reaching consensus. The second type of theory relaxes these standards and is more open to different forms of communication (e.g. stories, testimonies) in order to adapt the ideal of deliberation to the real world.

The literature on political parties and the (normative) democratic theory evolved in mutual isolation for over a century (van Biezen and Saward, 2008). Party politics scholarship remained silent on the meaning and practices of democracy in general (van Biezen and Saward, 2008; Stokes, 1999). Political parties have been absent from the core interests of the democratic theory (Dahl 1989). With few exceptions (Cohen 1989), theorists and empirical students of deliberative democracy were rather unsympathetic with regard to the

compatibility of deliberation and political parties (Fishkin 1991, Gutmann and Thompson 1996).

In recent years, several parties organized themselves as deliberative polls. In line with the logic of a deliberative platform, they tested several decision-making procedures that privilege the participation of members in various discussions, shared authority and direct engagement, e-ballots, etc. These processes have taken place in old and emerging parties, with differing ideological profiles and from different political contexts. Among theorists of deliberative democracy and scholars of party politics regard for deliberative practices applied to the internal organization of political parties increased, and different contemporary students acknowledged parties as mediating devices favorable for building reasonable opinion by means of argumentation (Teorell 1999, White and Ypi, 2011, Wolkenstein 2016, 2018). The general idea is that deliberation could fix the broken link between citizens, their representatives and the decision-making process. The legitimacy of political parties is increasingly connected to the provision of concrete opportunities for achieving collective decision in which representatives from different party levels, citizens and/or experts get involved in discussions open to changes of preferences in the light of argumentation (Cohen 1989, Wolkenstein 2016). Without fully substituting the aggregation through the process of majority, intra-party deliberation intends to bridge the gap both downwards (i.e. between parties and citizenry) and upwards (between citizens and institutions) by connecting deliberation on the ground with policy-making at the large scale (Teorell, 1999, Wolkenstein, 2016, Ebeling and Wolkenstein, 2018).

From a party perspective, the gist of the story is that deliberative practice can contribute to the education of the party members and stakeholders, and enhance the legitimacy of party decisions through mechanisms based on forging consensus (van Biezen and Saward, 2008, 30). In line with Cohen's arguments (1989, 31-32), political parties become arenas where individuals can overcome their material inequalities and help articulating the common good. In connection to the criticism of the current representative system (Fishkin, 2009, Van Reybrouck, 2016) and the limited success of traditional forms of intra-party democracy in terms of strengthening the power of members on the ground (Cross and Katz, 2013, Pilet and Cross, 2014), deliberation is associated with opportunities for the empowerment of party members and citizens in general. The literature on party politics acknowledges that decision-making in most political parties is limited to a fairly small elite of

professional politicians. This is not only an issue of preserved internal power asymmetries, but also a mismatch between elites and party members: the group of decision makers is descriptively unrepresentative of the broader party membership (gender, age, education level, social class). Organizing parties around broad deliberative platforms is supposed to make the party more inclusive (Cohen 1989), with benefits not only in terms of identification, but also of strategic advantages in the electoral competition (van Biezen and Saward, 2008).

Deliberative practices, including the ones organized by parties, are also supposed to increase the efficacy of the policy-making process (Fung, 2006). In parallel, the spread of deliberative practices is connected with the assumption that democracy should not be limited to electoral participation. Developing deliberative practices becomes a way of deepening democracy by involving more people in exchanges about the public good. According to the systemic approach (Mansbridge et al. 2012), political parties become part of the map of nodes that forms of argumentation and information. As such, deliberative practices within parties are perceived as an opportunity the impact of which goes beyond the party organization. Deliberation becomes supportive of educating party members / citizens to go beyond goals defined by self-interest and deliberate on aspects useful for the general interest (Weinstock, 2015, Wolkenstein, 2016). This goes back to the participatory tradition and the idea that 'participation make better citizens' (Mansbridge, 1999). Practices of deliberation within parties can become windows of opportunity for party members and supporters in general to learn about how democracy works and to make reasoned and autonomous political decisions (White and Ypi, 2011).

These (normative) interpretations show that deliberative practices can be an appropriate response to the malaise currently faced by representative democracy in terms of legitimacy, efficacy and citizen involvement. Nevertheless, how do they function? Do deliberative practices strengthen the legitimacy of parties that implement them? How do these procedures of discussion interact with the other functions performed by the party (coalition formation, public decisions)? This symposium aims to answer these questions.

Symposium: cases and discussion

The symposium gathers four case studies: the Czech Pirate Party, the Danish Alternativet, the Romanian Demos, and the Spanish Workers' Socialist Party (see Table 1). The criterion for this selection is straightforward: the recent implementation of deliberative practices within the

party organization. Each of the four case studies provides an original in-depth analysis of the deliberative practice and its effects. The descriptive information in itself is extremely revealing and useful for further research. Moreover, the four case studies can be empirically compared with each other and provide theoretical insights on the pathways through which the literature will be able to build more contingent and nuanced generalizations.

Beyond the intrinsic relevance connected with the limited available information in the current literature on the topic in general and the new insights from understudied parties (i.e. Czech Pirate Party and Demos), the four cases exhibit a high level of variation with regard to preconditions, forms, duration and effects of deliberation (table 1). On this ground, each contribution inquires as to the preconditions of deliberation within parties (who initiated the deliberation and why), the practices (how they are implemented, who participates) of deliberation and their effects. The analysis relies on qualitative content analysis of party statutes, documentary research and semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of these parties (i.e. the Czech Pirate Party, Demos, and Alternativet).

This diversity is supportive for explanations that might be generalizable to other similar events. To substantiate these elements, in the remainder of this analysis we shall present a comparative assessment of the four cases. While these parties are most similar with regard to the adoption of deliberative practices in their organization, the extent to which they implement these practices differ significantly.

All the parties under scrutiny claim to be inclusive and internally democratic. The structure of the three new parties provides a considerably stronger basis for member mobilization and provides explicit opportunities for deliberation practices. This is connected to the creation of these parties. The newness of Alternativet, Demos and the Czech Pirate Party equates to explicit reference to their being different from traditional politics. Their discourse focusses on their difference from the politics as usual, expresses disdain for hierarchical models of bureaucratic organization and places emphasis on the need to bring politics closer to the people. Their statutes codify the prevalingly deliberative nature of the party organizations and the direct engagement of members in the decision-making process both with regard to internal matters (i.e. candidate selection) and external aspects (i.e. coalition arrangements). In two out of three cases (Alternativet and the Czech Pirate Party), the organizations make extensive use of digital means.

Table 1: Deliberation within political parties: A summary of the symposium

Political party	Party formation	Political representation	Political Identity	Party organization	Case study			
					Period	Party level	Issue	Effects
Alternativet	2013	National Sub-national	Environmental sustainability New political culture Entrepreneurship and social innovation	Statutory codified use of bottom-up deliberative Online and in loco forums	2016	National level	Wide range of policy formation and decision-making	Intensive deployment of deliberative fora + mixt evidence in terms of collecting inputs and building consensus Tension between intra-party deliberation and the time-pressure of being in public office
Czech Pirate Party	2009	National Sub-national European Parliament	Safeguard of civil liberties, transparency, anti-corruption	Statutory codified grassroots democracy Online forums	2018	Brno local level	Coalition behavior at a local level	Multilayered effects (coalition formation, legitimacy of the local party organization, increased support among the national party's members on maintaining local branches' responsibilities)
Demos	2018	-	Solidarity, inclusiveness	Statutory codified deliberation Online and in loco forums	2018	National level	Candidate selection for EP elections	Improved communication with its electorate coupled with increased the intra-party conflicts
PSOE	1879/1974	National Sub-national European Parliament	Social democracy	Decentralized; Statutory forms of traditional intra-party democracy Ad hoc experience of deliberative practices	2015	National level	Coalition behavior at a national level	No explicit effect beyond the visibility of the experiment in the media

In the case of a party with a longer history (the PSOE in Spain), the rationale behind the *ad hoc* use of deliberative practices is connected to both external and internal factors. On the one hand, it was an attempt to control the effects of the post-2011 electoral defeat and prevent the further alienation of the center-left voters in the aftermath of the 2015 legislative elections. On the other hand, it was a strategy proposed from within with the intent to calm down internal party conflicts. As such, while deliberative practices are fully institutionalized in the three new parties under scrutiny, in the Spanish case it remains a one-off experiment (Table 1).

This brings us to the second important element. We know from the extensive literature on intra-party democracy that the opening-up the decision-making processes potentially challenges the parties' traditional pursuit of votes (Lapalombara and Weiner, 1966, Hazan and Rahat, 2010). In line with May's law of curvilinear disparity, the literature considered that the mid-level of activists are a deviant group of extremists and radical zealots (Norris 1995). Despite limited empirical tests, different authors drastically challenged the pattern of curvilinear disparity within parties and shed light on a diffused substantive consensus (Norris, 1995; Van Holsteyn et al., 2017). We also know that arenas in which people (members/supporters) can express themselves, weigh the arguments of competing reasoning are normatively desirable, since they are positively connected to information and socialization in democratic values and political equality. However participation in these arenas has also relevant 'costs' for the participants who must spend time and cognitive resources to express their point of view, listen to others, orientate themselves among a wide range of arguments and potentially find agreement (Verba et al., 1995, Hooghe, 1999).

Complex procedures, lack of agreement, or increased internal conflicts are among the elements that can induce members to become inactive, prevent parties from attracting new followers, and lead them to lose existing supporters. In parallel, parties that fail to win elections feed members' dissatisfaction; members start valuing the costs of membership as being too high, distance themselves and/or defect. With regard to their electoral results national, sub-national and EU elections, with the exception of the PSOE, the electoral support varies considerably. The Romanian DEMOS does not have any representatives in public offices and failed to collect the number of signatures required to take part in the European Elections. The Czech Pirate Party came third in the 2017 national elections, won representation in the most recent elections to the European Parliament and has various elected representatives at

a sub-national level (Otjes, 2019; Vodova & Voda this symposium). Alternativet won national-level representation in Denmark in 2015 and 2019; but failed to win representation in the 2019 European Parliament. The party has MPs in various local parliaments, a couple of mayors and a vice mayor.

The information provided by the four cases does not provide enough support for a consistent evaluation of the impact of horizontal decision-making procedures on electoral results. Both the Danish and the Czech cases point to a strong connection between the emphasis on deliberation and inclusive decision-making processes and the two parties' electoral fortunes. In the Romanian case, some of the participants conceived their engagement in deliberative as being time consuming and with uncertain effects on the party electoral competitiveness. According to the empirical data provided, the relevance of the deliberative procedures for the electoral arena depends on the capacity of members to mobilize and to look for alternative means of communication (i.e. the Czech case), which in turn is influenced more by generational aspects than the structural strength of the party or the rules of deliberation. The experiment of deliberation in new parties is compatible with limited economic resources, counterbalanced by the online technology.

It is however important to stress the impact of deliberation practices on dismantling power asymmetries. In all four cases, experiments with deliberative platforms were felt to be investments in making parties more inclusive. This was particularly true with regard to the Czech case and, more specifically, to the decision of the majority of members to maintain local branches' responsibilities. As such, the symposium provides additional empirical evidence that deliberative practices can deepen democracy within parties and, in particular, can reinforce local organizations' capacity to become genuinely functional vehicles for connecting citizens and (local) government (see also Wolkenstein 2016). Due to the limited cases under scrutiny, it has not been possible to evaluate the potential skew towards a quantitative model of plebiscitary democracy within parties (Gerbaudo 2019), namely exchanges of information and arguments in party debates that, in the end, ratify the line of the leadership.

In all four cases, the deliberative practices were *ex-ante* portrayed as investments in the increased legitimacy of the outcomes; this remains generally true through all the stages of the process. Demos and the unintended negative effects due to increased internal divisions provide an exception to this. In addition, the different fora implemented are in keeping with

attempts to control power asymmetries within parties. However, the deliberative practices analyzed are not always connected to greater efficacy in decision-making. Part of the explanation is generational and linked to the degree of familiarity with digital arenas. Other explanations are connected to the *in itinere* change of institutional rules (as in the Romanian case). The functioning of the elective institutions generates additional pressures in terms of efficacy within parties. Given the information available, the theoretical assumption connected to the better quality of the decisions that follow deliberation could not be assessed. However, the interviews conducted for the various papers support the expectation that participation in general and deliberation in particular make better citizens by increasing both civic skill and the participants' knowledge.

The four parties in our sample provided opportunities for citizens to exchange arguments and evaluate different stances with the aim of deciding internal aspects and/or external issues such as coalition behavior. The main conclusion of the symposium is that, by empowering arenas of deliberation within, parties can bring electoral success and represent an alternative to traditional aggregative forms of intra-party democracy. The extremely innovative element is that this can also be true in the context of post-communist countries, despite widespread skeptical assessments of this in the literature with regard to the degree of inclusiveness of the decision-making circle (Pilet and Cross 2014).

There are however relevant limitations with regard to the legitimacy, the outcome and efficacy of the entire process. Further research is needed in order to assess whether the tensions that emerge from the implementation of deliberation can, in the long run, prevent the consolidation of electoral support and render this alternative way of conceiving intra-party democracy less attractive and less feasible in real party politics.

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